

November 15 - December 16, 2000

Curated by  
Sally Berger

Gregg Bordowitz  
Jim Campbell  
Magdalena Campos-Pons  
Ximena Cuevas  
LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman  
with David Isay of Sound Portrait Productions  
Christopher Sullivan

Apex Art Curatorial Program

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Cover: Ximena Cuevas *El Diablo en la Piel* (Devil in the Flesh) 1998 video still

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## Something Happened



### Something Happened

This exhibition reflects on the auto/biographical, the personal, and self-portraiture across and through artistic mediums -- in video, video installation, photography, animated film, spoken word and sound, written text, and electronics. The artists in the exhibition use life as material: Each has taken on the autobiographical as complexity, identity as multiplicity, the personal as time and memory. It is popularly perceived that increased technological manipulation of the image will render the real less ascertainable. The artists in this exhibition shift this concern through a fluidity of expression across methodologies and materials to arrive at a more experiential type of work.

Here the everyday, the particular, and the private experience -- that which is generally unnoticed, unmarked, unspoken, takes precedent. The artists place themselves within the work through narrative, physicality and memory. Alter egos, fictional characters, symbols, camera movement, voice and body rhythms, mark the artist's presence. At some point the viewer/receiver steps inside and becomes the embodiment of the experience, part of the immediate, the urgent and the universal.



Christopher Sullivan drawing from *Consuming Spirits, Part 1* 1998 film animation

Performance artist and filmmaker Christopher Sullivan uses autobiographically-based, fictionalized episodic narratives (in literary terms the *roman à clef*) to evoke what he calls the "apparent dysfunction" of his childhood in Pittsburgh. *Consuming Spirits, Part 1*, a work-in-progress, intertwines two different visual worlds in film animation to describe memory and the present, and the tension between the inexplicable and the familiar. The hilly landscape of industrial Pittsburgh, dotted with small homes and sounds that travel between locales, informs its sense of intimate scale, yet alienated space. The characters, law, and social service and government agencies in the story conspire to create this troubled universe. The inspiration for Sullivan's film came from finding out family secrets late in life that rewrite his history.

Gregg Bordowitz was actively engaged in the AIDS awareness movement when at the age of 23 he discovered that he was HIV-antibody positive. From that moment

the most intimate detail of his life became his material. In the videotape *Fast Trip Long Drop*, 1993, he confronts his birth father's abandonment and compares the onslaught of his own illness

to the rash dare devil acts of Evil Kneivel. An alter ego (Alter Allesman) heightens our awareness of and complicity in his plight. Bordowitz's subsequent texts more graphically depict the physical manifestations and emotional realities of 'everyday' life turned into a vigilance over one's own mortality. In "The Drug User", a short story written specifically for this exhibition, we experience Bordowitz's dilemma through Alexander Pittleman. This allegorical character expresses the desires and weaknesses of a sick man caught in the contradictions of our age.



Gregg Bordowitz *Fast Trip Long Drop* 1993 video still



Magdalena Campos-Pons *Sagrada Familia 2* 1999/2000 Polaroid Polacolor 2 x 24 in. each

Magdalena Campos-Pons's work revolves around the strong ties to her African, Cuban, and American roots. Born in Cuba of African descent, she married and moved to America in 1990. Exile is inscribed in her experience and she uses portraiture to describe and to maintain aspects of her multicultural history and identity, to merge the cultural and the historical within a new present context. At the center of her work are the people she cares about.

Multiple forms (performance and sculpture) are combined with various materials (fabric, glass, video, natural elements) and symbols (rituals, colors) in her multi-media installations and large format Polaroid photographs. The layers of form and meaning create what the artist describes as a "Third Space: a space between territory, between what is home; between languages; between media, between performance versus ritual, between three- and two-dimensional, between all these layers and what happens there in-between."

Campos-Pons's portrait photographs arranged in differing compositions express this idea of an interstitial space -- what happens "in-between"<sup>1</sup> -- through performance and stillness. The triptych in the exhibition, *Sagrada Familia 2*, features her nuclear family. A man, a child, a woman (husband, son, artist), stand with backs toward the camera in three separate but linearly placed photographs. The figures form a unit, each of their backs and the eyes painted on them of different colors and hues that interweave a dialogue of nurturing, protection, and vigilance over one another. Campos-Pons's use of

autobiography and portraiture is a process that is not based on a fixed notion of identity, but on the idea that one should both mark the difference, and find the similarities.

Ximena Cuevas's enigmatic video sketches reflect on passion, romance and the life of an artist in the larger context of contemporary Mexican culture. Her single-channel videos express the duality between inner and outer worlds. The interior self is reflected by the sense of whispered secrets; the exterior is chaotic and contradictory. She says, "To live with the camera as part of my skin is one of the huge qualities of video. For the first time mankind has the small camera that underdresses you." The claustrophobic video installation *La Puerta*, was inspired by a line from T.S. Eliot, "Hell is oneself. . . There is nothing to escape from and nothing to escape to."<sup>2</sup>

David Isay specializes in a unique form of empathetic, non-narrated sound portraits that draw an intimate connection between the subjects and the audience. The company he founded, Sound Portrait Productions, is dedicated to creating radio that brings neglected American voices to a national arena. His focus is on the poetics and the beliefs of the seemingly eccentric, the forgotten, and the poor. He began recording oral histories, "probably because I felt like a loser as a kid and appreciate underdogs," and "to shine a light on the hidden parts of American society."

Isay met LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman while conducting research for a radio documentary series on issues of race and ethnicity in Chicago ("Chicago Matters"). The two 13 year-old boys responded to his call for young people interested in telling their own stories. They were provided

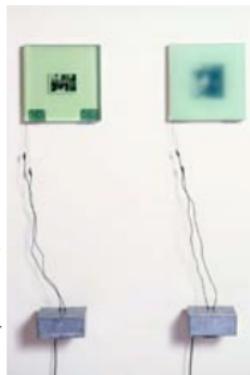


photos by John Brooks from the book *Our America* 1997 by LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman with David Isay

with tape recorders, microphones, and training which they used over a seven-day period in March of 1993. Their remarkably candid diary *Ghetto Life 101* was the result. It begins with LeAlan's words, "Good morning. Day 1. Walking to school, leaving out the door. . . This is my walk everyday, so I'm taking you on a little journey through my life. . ." Interviews with family, friends, and neighbors are recorded with anecdotal detail from the boys perspective. Editing and sound choices were made in collaboration with Isay. Several years later when a tragic incident occurred in the housing projects, the boys decided with Isay to investigate the reasons behind it. The boys spent a year interviewing for *Remorse: The Fourteen Stories of Eric Morse* that unfolded as an informative and rare feature-length radio documentary.

Jim Campbell combines his knowledge of mathematics and electrical engineering with art to create electronic installations that involve video, media, and the computer and to reflect on time and memory. He uses the polarities between engineering (to solve problems) with those of art (to create problems) to his advantage. He moves between the technical and personal, the logical and intuitive when conceiving his work.

*Portrait of My Father*, and *Photo of My Mother* most clearly represent how personal content cycles through his work. From *Memory Works* (1994 - 98), a series of non-narrative pieces, each work is based upon a digitally recorded memory of an event. Some of these electronic records represent a personal memory and others a collective memory. Using some of the same tools for interactivity, but deviating from Campbell's other explorations in partici-



Jim Campbell *Portrait of My Father* 1994-95 and *Photo of My Mother* 1996 mixed media installations (custom electronics, glass, LCD material, and photographs) 62 x 12 x 10 in. each

patory works these installations investigate the artist's interiority rather than viewer-triggered interaction. The electronic memories are manipulated to transform an associated object mounted on the wall. The human memories are recorded as physical processes that involve body rhythms to dispel the usual notions of memory as an image or as sound. These works explore the characteristic of invisibility common to both human and computer memory and are based on the idea that to represent memories, they must be transformed.

Autobiographically inspired work has captured contemporary artists' imaginations. Many artists today share the desire to render and to claim what happens to them, as do the artists in *Something Happened*. Sadie Benning's teenage Pixelvision diaries, George Kuchar's eccentric video journals, Jonathon Horowitz's mediated memories, and Tracey Emin's intimate tales of sexual escapades are just a few additional examples of artists working from the personal. The proliferation of small video cameras and the immediacy of recording and image playback combined with the performative elements found in current art practices have influenced artists' use of their own images and experiences. Shifting perspectives concerning the relationship between truth and falsehood and fiction and non-fiction forms, and the desire to make contemporary culture and the technology that surrounds us more human, have all impacted to broaden the scope of the autobiographical and the use of the real in contemporary art today.

1. A reference to Homi K. Bhabha, "Beyond the Pale: Art in the Age of Multicultural Translation" in Whitney Biennial Exhibition catalogue, Whitney Museum of American Art & Harry N. Abrams, Inc. New York, 1993, p 63.

2. "Hell is oneself, Hell is alone, the other figures in it, Merely projections. There is nothing to escape from, And nothing to escape to. One is always alone." T. S. Eliot, "The Cocktail Party" (1950). Act I, Sc. III.